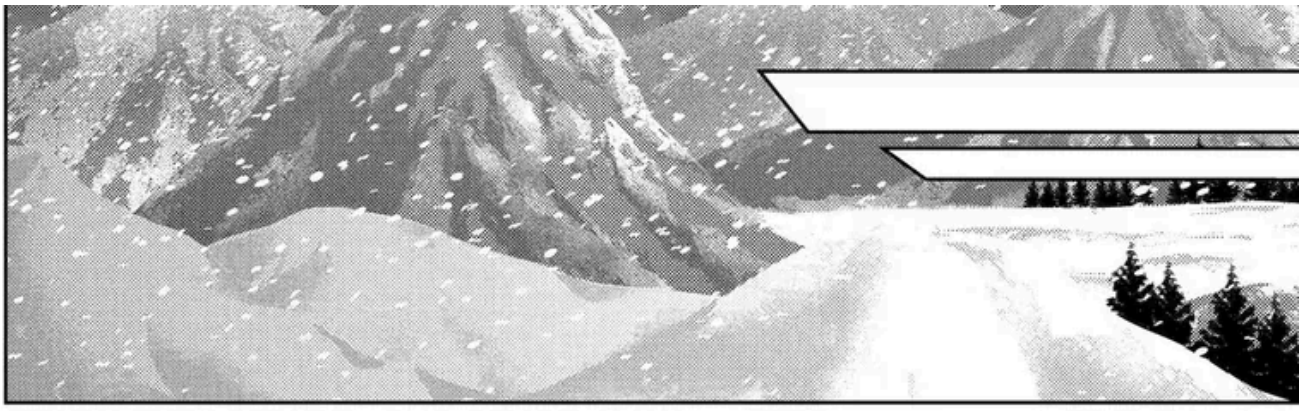
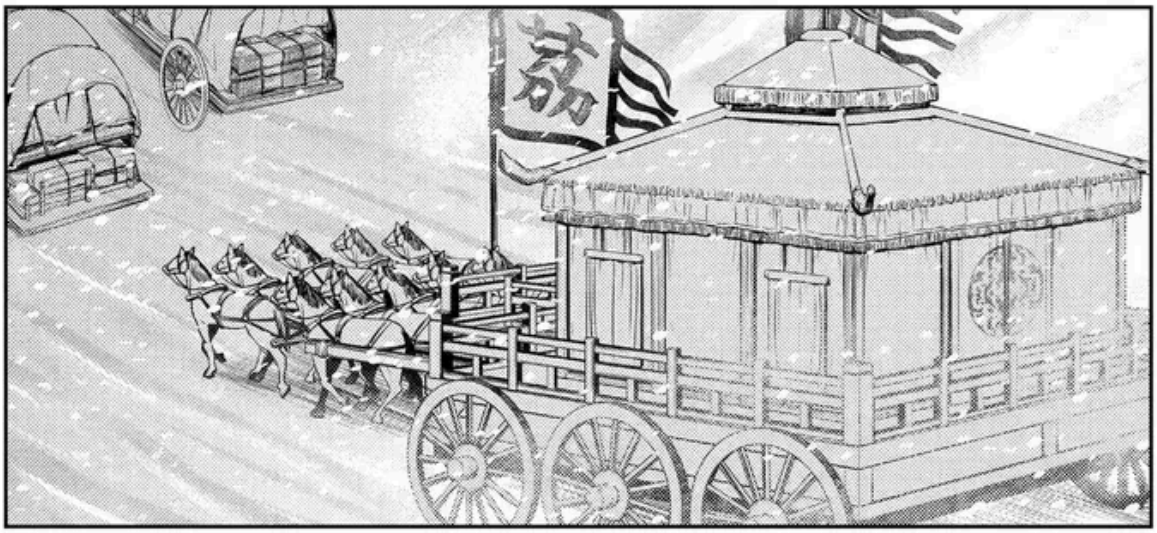
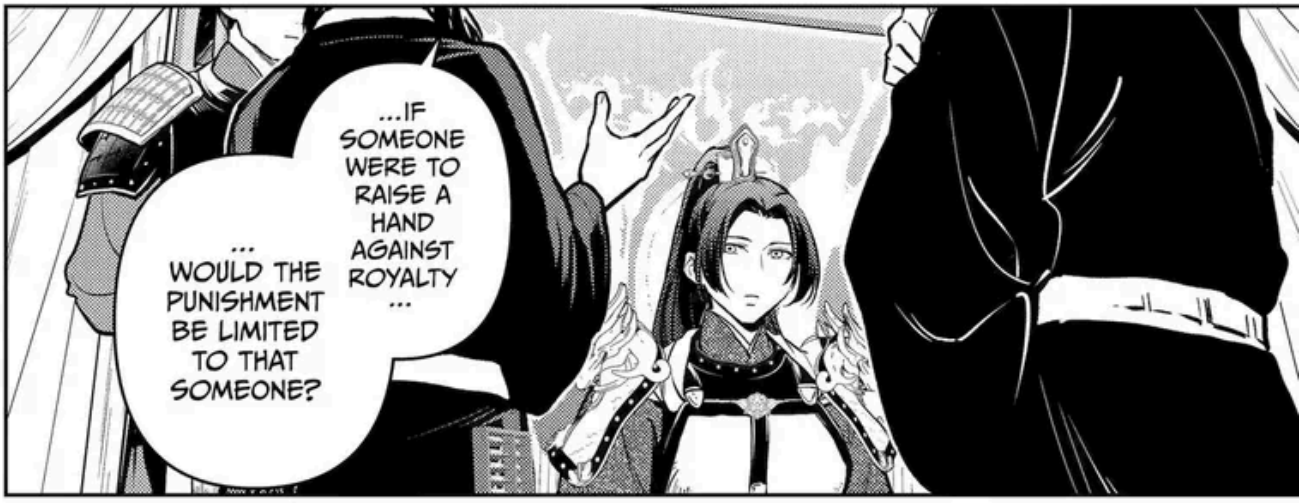
Chapter 81: Marching





JUST AS HE'D INSISTED ...
...THE FORBIDDEN ARMY'S ON THE MOVE...

GRRNGH
HE LOOKS READY TO LASH OUT AT ANY MOMENT.
AND YET LAKAN'S TEMPER BURNS AS HOT AS EVER.
AND GAO SHUN ...
...HE'S POISED TO DRAW HIS BLADE AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE.
LUOMEN CALMED HIM BEFORE, BUT HE'S NOT WITH US NOW.
FATHER.
HYPO-THETICALLY SPEAKING...


...IF SOMEONE WERE TO RAISE A HAND AGAINST ROYALTY ...
... WOULD THE PUNISHMENT BE LIMITED TO THAT SOMEONE?

I KNOW, I KNOW.
HMPH
OR WOULD YOU CATCH MAOMAO IN THE FALLOUT?

WE'RE JUST LUCKY LAHAN CAME ALONG AS HIS ASSISTANT.

RAISING A HAND "AGAINST" ME, IN PREPARATION FOR...
...SOME-THING MORE.

HOW DID I FIGURE IT OUT?
LAHAN, JUST LIKE HIS ADOPTIVE FATHER...
...SEEMS TO HAVE KNOWN MY TRUE IDENTITY FOR SOME TIME.
HE CERTAINLY FITS IN WITH THE REST OF THE LA CLAN.
WELL, YOUR HEIGHT, WEIGHT, TORSO, AND WAIST...
...THEY WERE ALL A PERFECT MATCH. IT'S RARE FOR ANY TWO PEOPLE TO BE SO IDENTICAL!
HE'S OBVIOUSLY CAPABLE, BUT... DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND.
SHUDDER
STILL, YOU REALLY ARE QUITE GORGEOUS. IT'S A SHAME YOU AREN'T A WOMAN!

THE FORTRESS SHISHOU AND HIS TRAITORS ARE HOLED UP IN...
SWSH
...IS ON LAND THE SHI CLAN HAS CONTROLLED FOR MANY GENERA-TIONS.
A MOUNTAIN RANGE BEHIND IT, AND A WIDE PLAIN BEFORE IT.
IT'S PROBABLE HEAVY WEAPONRY IS BEING CONSTRUCTED WITHIN THE FORTRESS.
CLOSE TO ABUNDANT FORESTS...
...AND HOT SPRINGS THAT PROVIDE SULFUR.
THEY COULD BE EXTRACTING IT FROM THE DROPPINGS OF BATS AND RATS AND THE LIKE.
THERE'S A VAST, WARM CAVE NETWORK CLOSE BY.
BUT THEY COULDN'T HAVE ENOUGH SALTPETER TO MANUFACTURE BLACK POWDER, COULD THEY?

THE FORTRESS PROVIDES SUPERIOR HIGH GROUND WITH A CLEAR VIEW.
CANNONS ALONG THE RAMPARTS WOULD BE A SIGNIFICANT PROBLEM.
CAN WE REALLY DO THIS?
HE CAN REALLY SEE THAT FAR AHEAD?
PAP
RIGHT.
NO NEED TO WORRY.
ACCORDING TO ABACUS-BRAIN HERE.
IT IS THEORETICALLY POSSIBLE TO SUBDUE THEM WITHOUT EVER DEALING WITH CANNON FIRE.

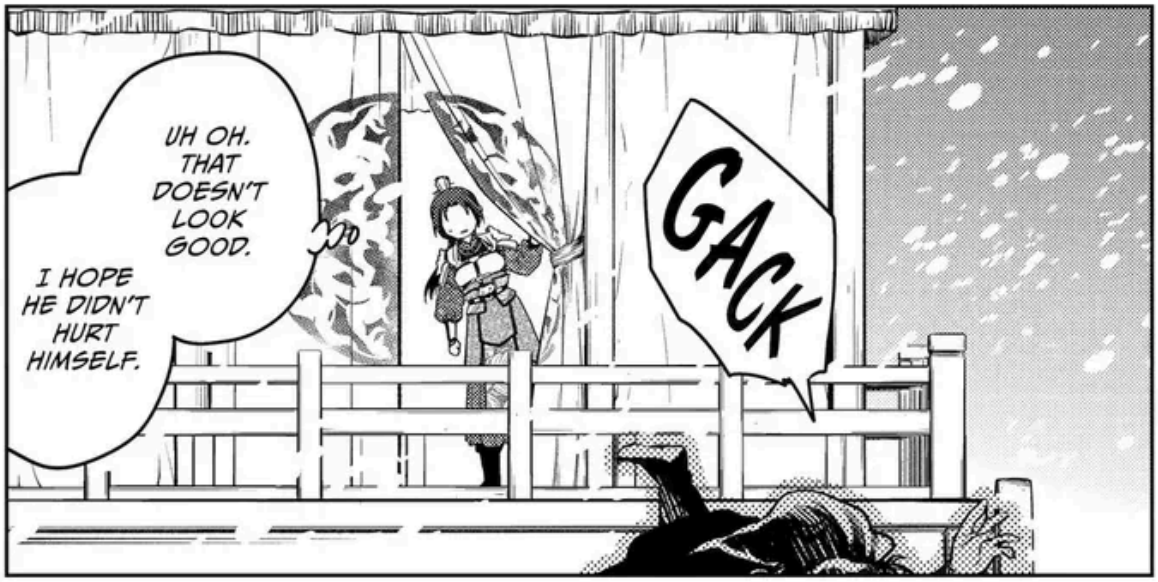
AND IN THAT CASE...
...WE NEED ONLY CAPTURE THE ARMORY BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE.
THWUMP
BLACK POWDER IS SUSCEPTIBLE TO AMBIENT MOISTURE.
...IT SHOULD BE STORED SOMEWHERE DRY, SUCH AS THE ARMORY.
TO PREVENT THAT FROM RUINING IT...
AN INTREPID PLAN, BUT IT COULD ACTUALLY WORK.
AN ECONOMICAL PLAN IS BEST, OF COURSE!
AH. OF COURSE. THIS ONE IS CERTAINLY FOND OF ECONOMICAL SOLUTIONS.

RIGHT.
WE'RE GETTING MAOMAO BACK.
EITHER WAY, WE CAN'T WASTE A SINGLE SECOND.
IF SHE'S AT THIS FORTRESS, WE NEED TO SEE HER TO SAFETY.
WE HAVE NO IDEA IF SHE WENT WILLINGLY OR NOT.
WAS SHE TAKEN AS A HOSTAGE?

THIS IS THE PLAN, THEN.
IF THE PLAN WORKS, THERE SHOULD BE MINIMAL CASUALTIES, RIGHT?
A MOMENT. THERE IS ONE PROBLEM.
SWISH

NGH...
THEN THE FORBIDDEN ARMY WILL LAUNCH AN AMBUSH?
JINSHI THE EUNUCH IS NOT HERE, LEADING THIS ARMY.
I COME WEARING PURPLE AND A HAIRPIN IN THE SHAPE OF A QILIN— SYMBOLS OF THE IMPERIAL FAMILY.
WE SHOULD SUBDUE REBELS WITH A GRAND, PROUD DISPLAY...
...YOU MEAN?
I UNDER-STAND, BUT...

I CONCUR WITH THE GRAND COMMANDANT.
...UNDER-STOOD.
OKAY, GOOD.
I WASN'T IN A HURRY TO HAVE MY SKULL FASHIONED INTO A GOBLET ANYWAY.
DON'T WORRY! DADDY'S COMING!
FWM
MAOMAO!


UH OH. THAT DOESN'T LOOK GOOD.
I HOPE HE DIDN'T HURT HIMSELF.
GACK

FROM THIS POINT ON...
...YOU WILL HAVE TO RECONSIDER HOW YOU INTERACT WITH HER.

—GETSU.

I KNOW.
JINSHI THE EUNUCH...
...DID NOT COME HERE.
WHAT THIS COUNTRY NEEDS IS A DECISIVE VICTORY IN THIS CONFLICT.
DECISIVE. NOT STRADDLING ANY SORT OF LINE, AS I HAD BEEN.
I WILL PLAY THE PART OF THE EUNUCH...
...NO MORE.

BOOOM
!
THE ARMY'S ALREADY HERE?
GRP
WE'RE UNDER ATTACK?

THAT SMELL ...
THE BLACK POWDER UNDERGROUND MUST HAVE GONE OFF.
NO... THEIR LIGHTS ARE STILL FAR IN THE DISTANCE.
AND HERE I THOUGHT I HAD ENOUGH TIME FOR A NAP.
SNF
HM?
I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO SLEEP ANYWAY.
NO...

... SLEEP HAS CONTINUED TO ELUDE ME.
FOR THIS PAST DECADE ...
EEK!
WHAT WAS THAT?!
A MAN IN THE EMPRESS'S FAVOR...
A SHREWD TANUKI OUTMA-NEUVER-ING THE EMPEROR ...
WHOEVER HOLDS THAT REPUTATION, HE ISN'T HERE RIGHT NOW.
I NEED TO INVES-TIGATE.
I NEED TO DO SOME-THING.

AND TO DO ANYTHING, I'LL HAVE TO PASS THROUGH THE ROOM MY WIFE IS IN.

EVERY MOMENT IS AGONY.
I CAN'T SUMMON ANY STRENGTH.
AH.
MY LEGS ARE HEAVY.

EVER SINCE LOULAN'S BIRTH...
...MY WIFE'S DRAWN IN WOMEN FROM THE CLAN...
...AND SET THEM ABOUT THE MEN SHE'S BOUGHT FOR ENTER-TAINMENT.
I CAN SEE IT ALREADY. SHE MUST HAVE BEEN INDULGING IN EXCESS. DRINK AND PASSION.
...CORRUPTING WHAT WERE AT ONE POINT CHASTE MOTHERS.
AS THOUGH SHE GETS SOME KIND OF THRILL OUT OF...
AND ALWAYS WHERE I'LL BE SURE TO NOTICE.
NIGHT AFTER NIGHT. RUBBING IT IN.

THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR GIFTED HER TO ME.
SHE WASN'T ALWAYS LIKE THIS.
OR, NO.
MY FIANCÉE WAS RE-TURNED TO ME AFTER TWENTY YEARS IN HIS CARE.
BUT HER TIME IN THE INNER COURT EMBITTERED HER.
ALONG WITH A DAUGHTER, SUIREI.
...I ALREADY HAD A WIFE.
AND WHEN SHE RETURNED ...

...I DOUBT SHE WAS EAGER TO MARRY ME, EITHER.
I NEVER MEANT TO TAKE ANOTHER AS MY WIFE...
A COVER STORY. HER TRUE FATHER WAS THE FORMER EMPEROR HIMSELF.
...SHE HAD BEEN BANISHED FROM THE INNER COURT.
BUT AS THE ILLEGITIMATE DAUGHTER OF A COURT PHYSICIAN...
...HE ENTREATED ME, ALREADY GROWING FEEBLE...
TWENTY YEARS PRIOR ...

LOOK AFTER MY CHILD.

AND THEN, MY WIFE ...
...WENT FROM BITTER TO OUTRIGHT TOXIC.
GO.
GO.
GET IT OVER WITH, QUICKLY.

CRRRK...

I'LL GO CHECK IT OUT RIGHT AWAY.
WHAT WAS THAT NOISE?
SLAM

...LOULAN.
LOULAN ?

AND WHY ARE YOU SO FILTHY?
WHAT IS IT?

IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS MESS...
...YOU, AND ALL THESE WOMEN, ABANDON YOUR CHILDREN AND LOSE YOURSELVES IN CARNAL PLEASURE.
YES, ESPECIALLY YOU.
AH!

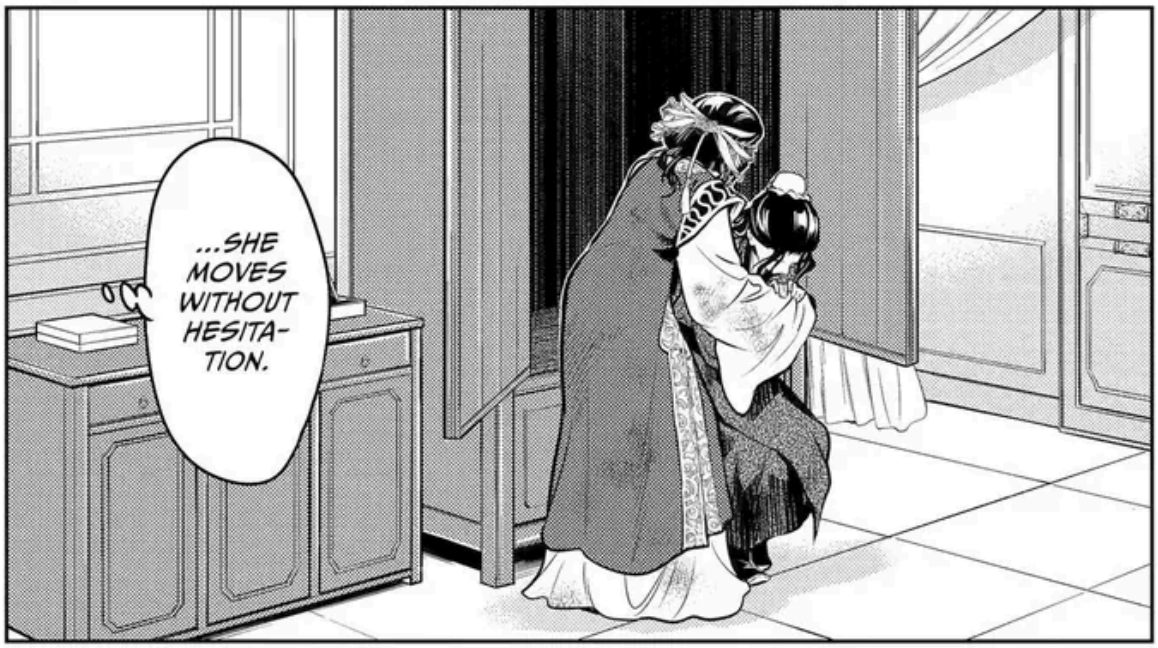
YOU ARE THE LAST PERSON WHO SHOULD BE CALLING OTHERS FILTHY.

WHAP
KYOU-U!
K—
FWM
I...
NOOO!
EEK!
GAAAH!
FWMP

IS THIS REALLY...
...MY LITTLE GIRL?
MY OBEDIENT DOLL OF A CHILD?
GRP

CRRK...
SHVR
SHVR

I'M SO, SO SORRY ...
...FOR TAKING SO LONG, SISTER.
SUIREI!


...SHE MOVES WITHOUT HESITA-TION.

THIS IS...
...FAR FROM THE FIRST OR SECOND TIME SHE'S DONE THIS, ISN'T IT?

WHAT-EVER WEIGHS ME DOWN ...
I'M THEIR FATHER.

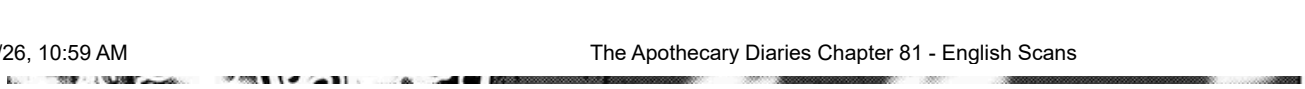
...I HAVE TO GO TO THEM, REGARDLESS.

BWOOM
SWAY
SWAY
RRRRMBL
?!

THE—
THE ARMORY ...!
FWM

THE ENTIRE FORTRESS IS...
...BURIED IN SNOW!
YOU UNDERSTOOD YOU NEVER HAD A CHANCE AT VICTORY, DIDN'T YOU?

YOU'RE THE OLD TANUKI FROM A DEN OF FOXES.
SO... DON'T LET UP YOUR DECEPTIONS NOW...
... FATHER.
YOU'VE ONE LAST CHANCE TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY, NOW THAT IT'S ALL OVER.



I'LL DEAL WITH MOTHER.

SWSH
CRNCH
CRNCH
CRNCH
SHAA
IT'S TIME.

STORM THE FORTRESS!

RAAAHH
ワァァッ
ガッ
WHACK
HEY!
WHMP
I GOT ANOTHER ONE! TIE HIM UP!

FWM
CRNCH
WHAT IS THIS?
THEY WERE ALL BARRICADED IN THIS FORT...
...BUT IT'S ALMOST LIKE WE CAUGHT THEM TOTALLY UNPREPARED. PANTS DOWN AND ALL.

THE FORBIDDEN ARMY IS WASTED ON THESE PEOPLE.
HFF

...IS SUPPOSED TO BE SHISHOU, HEAD OF THE SHI CLAN AND A MAJOR PLAYER IN THE IMPERIAL COURT.
THE MAN WHO ROUNDED UP ALL THESE SOLDIERS AND TOOK THIS ABANDONED FORTRESS ...

HE MAY AS WELL HAVE SENT A LETTER TO THE EMPEROR DECLARING A REBELLION.
...AND HOLE HIMSELF UP HERE WITH ALL THESE SOLDIERS?
BUT TO VANISH FROM THE CAPITAL...
HE'S SUPPOSED TO BE A SHREWD TANUKI, FEARED AMONGST THE COURT...
...SO WHY WOULD HE MAKE SUCH A BONEHEAD MOVE?
EVEN I KNOW HE HAD NO CHANCE OF WINNING.
...BUT PLAYING AT SEDITION WITH NO MORE THAN THIS AND SOME SOLDIERS?
IT'S A BIG FORT, SURE...
WHOA!
MAN, BLOOD REALLY STANDS OUT ON WHITE, HUH?
...OH WELL. WHATEVER. IT'S NOT MY JOB TO FIGURE THAT OUT.

WE SPLIT INTO TWO GROUPS WHILE MARCHING TO THE FORT.
AN INFANTRY UNIT OF SKILLED SOLDIERS USED TO FORGING THROUGH SNOW...
...WENT ON AHEAD WITHOUT ANY TORCHES, WEARING THESE WHITE CLOAKS.
I HAVE TO SAY, THIS WHOLE STRATEGY WAS SOMETHING ELSE.
THE FORTRESS'S SOLDIERS WOULD BE SO DISTRACTED BY THE LARGER FORCE BEHIND LIT UP WITH TORCHES...
...THEY WOULDN'T NOTICE US COMING.

THESE GLOWING WOODEN CARVINGS OF FISH WE USED TO NAVIGATE ...
...ARE APPARENTLY USED BY SAILORS. THEY FLOAT THEM IN A BUCKET AND IT SHOWS THEM WHERE THEY'RE FACING.
THE GLOWING COMES FROM POWDER FROM GLOWING MUSHROOMS. I THINK.
WHOOPS.
SLIP
CAN'T LOSE THIS.
BUT, YEAH.
THE ELITE SQUAD GRABBED ALL THAT GUNPOWDER AND JUST...
...RAN OFF SOME-WHERE.
THEY USED ALL OF THAT GUNPOWDER TO CREATE AN AVALANCHE? WOW.
I KNOW WHOEVER CAME UP WITH THAT IS CRAZY.
ACHOO